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COUNTERPLOTS

THE pre-war taste in fiction being dead (it has been buried by several distinguished publishers), and quite a new vogue having appeared, the very important question arises: What are authors to do with their stock of 1916 and 1917 plannings and plottings? As these have been the result of vast intellectual labour, it would clearly be a lamentable waste of brain produce to allow them to remain upon their shelves. An author who has been so judicious as to consult the present writer has also been so kind as to let him publish the following practical solution of this vital problem, in order that as many deserving writers as possible may benefit by the demonstration.

THE EMANCIPATION OF MAGDALEN

THE design for this romance was of a pattern very fashionable till quite lately. Magdalen, a spirited young lady of nineteen, beautiful and talented, was condemned by the caprice of fate to possess an altogether uncongenial and, indeed, one may say, an unworthy family circle. Her father, Colonel Warpheend, was of the typical, prejudiced, bigoted, "damn-it-miss-am-I-not-your-father," military species; a really horrid fellow as conceived by the talented young authoress. Magdalen's brother Randolph was as rakish and selfish as young men of twenty-one generally are (they were coming in for terrible castigation in this promising novel); while her sister Martha exhibited all the defects of a thoroughly domesticated woman.

Conceive of the effective scene it would have made (before the war) when the Colonel discovers the MS. of twelve chapters of a novel in his daughter Magdalen's handwriting, entitled 'The Rise of Judith,' and actually depicting what that Philistine warrior has always been in the habit of regarding as a lady's fall!

With flashing insight and startling power Magdalen has uttered the cry of what was lately the New, and is now (unhappily for our authoress) the Out-of-Date Woman. Emancipation, freedom from the stifling conventionalities of society, liberty to lead a woman's life as a woman dashed well wants to lead it; these are the soul-shaking, Philistine-shocking demands of Magdalen uttered in her MS. novel.

Rising like a skylark to the occasion, Magdalen debates the problems of sex with her scandalised family through five long and sparkling chapters. The MS. novel is snatched from her hands and burnt by her outraged father, to the accompaniment of a flood of conventional arguments which our gifted authoress would have made to sound very thin indeed. Randolph, who is actually engaged at that moment in an intrigue with the housemaid (our authoress spares man none of his failings), expounds the same conventional morality with disgusting hypocrisy. Martha is cold, supercilious, and unforgiving—a typical virtuous wo-

man, in fact. Naturally, Magdalen comes out of the five-chapter controversy with flying colours. Equally naturally, her unspeakable parent sends her under escort to her strong-minded Aunt Seraphina to be dressed down still more drastically.

And now we get the real note of genius struck. Aunt Seraphina turns out to be a disillusioned virgin. Instead of dressing down her erring niece, she expounds for three chapters views which are an advance even on Magdalen's breezy opinions.

"Drain the cup of life to the dregs, my dear!" she cries. "Whatever you do, avoid the loveless, stunted destiny of your unhappy aunt!"

Dramatically the scene changes. The intoxicated reader is carried straight into the midst of the most Bohemian Bohemia ever conceived by a young lady who has only once been in a studio, but who has—which is far more important—the divine gift of imagination. The central figure is "Quis," the nickname of the brilliant woman painter whose work is the delight of the truly artistic and the scandal of the Philistines. Red-haired, greeneyed, sylph-like in form, and quite irresistible by any man who has a wife to desert, this delightful creature becomes the bosom friend of the now notorious Magdalen. For Magdalen has re-written her novel, exhibiting several times more flashing insight and startling power than she exhibited the first time. It is, of course, taboo at all the libraries and bookstalls, and has even been preached at by the Bishop of London, so that she has become a rival to Quis herself.

Amidst the clouds of scented tobacco-smoke and the fumes of alcohol, veronal, and other stimulating essences which float through the studio of Quis and the flat of Magdalen, the reader soon discovers a magnificent male figure which is clearly

destined to play a worthy part in this drama. This is "To-to," pet name of the famous morphomaniac sculptor, a gentleman (if our authoress will forgive me for applying this perhaps rather inappropriate term to such a type of the New Man—as he was three short years ago) whose relations to Quis are more than hinted at.

To-to turns his alluring eyes to Magdalen, who likewise turns hers to him, and in a series of volcanic chapters we see Quis left with a bullet through her brain (through her head, anyhow, though what it encountered there our authoress does not specifically say). Meanwhile the enraptured Magdalen and To-to are enjoying the greatest felicity in a Riviera hotel, when lo! another equally magnificent male appears.

This is Popherintski, the world-famous musician, as hairy a genius as ever strummed. It takes Magdalen but four passionate chapters to elope with this latest lion, and then the *dénoûment* positively rushes to meet the enthralled reader.

While enjoying a beautiful prospect of the sunrise from the top of Mont Blanc (whither they have gone for symbolical purposes) the happy couple learn the news of To-to's death from an overdose of morphia. Two days later the distraught Colonel Warpheend receives a note dated from Mont Blanc, informing him that Magdalen and Popherintski propose to embark on an avalanche which is just due to descend upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of the valleys 14,000 feet below.

With this truly inspired piece of symbolism the tale would have concluded, had it ever been written. But alas! the War came, and a few slight alterations seem quite essential. In the first place, the title is easily altered into—

The Precipitation of Magstein

As for the plot, the "Emancipation" may almost be said to convert itself into a first-class Air Drama. Magdalen, of course, becomes Magstein, a sinister figure of mysterious origin, at present acting as butler to Colonel Warpheend. The gallant Colonel will remain as before, except that his characteristics will have other adjectives applied to them. This determined, single-minded, martial gentleman is the patriotic inventor of a new anti-aircraft gun, and his confidant and assistant is, of course, his talented butler, Magstein.

Another fresh selection of adjectives (which in the English language are very numerous) leaves Martha a charming, blushing, and yet delightfully competent V.A.D., employed in the hospital of which her Aunt Seraphina is matron. As for Randolph, he need merely be converted into a first cousin whose youthful follies were laid aside when he accepted a commission in "K I." (As a brother he could not, of course, marry Martha at the end.)

The first incidents are dramatic and mysterious enough. The gun is tampered with several times, and the Colonel is dashed and hanged if he can guess who the unscrupulous scoundrel can be. Magstein professes to be equally puzzled, and for a thrilling chapter or two misleads all but the most sophisticated readers into thinking Randolph is the criminal. But the reader's eyes begin to open when he finds this sinister butler actually daring to make love to the beautiful Martha, and disclosing a dark hint that he is not what he seems. In fact, he drops distinct allusions to estates in East Prussia and shares in Krupps. Martha, of course, fails altogether to understand these allusions, but she rejects his unworthy advances with the scorn they deserve.

And now the drama and mysteriousness deepen with a vengeance. Magstein mysteriously disappears, leaving the Colonel with the dark suspicion that the secret plans of his gun have been photographed. Of course he is too guileless and honourable to suspect his own faithful butler (whom he mourns as probably murdered), but the reader exclaims "Aha!" several times about this point.

Still following closely on the lines of the "Emancipation," the scene now changes to Bohemian London, only in this version it is a German Club in Soho which we visit, where Quis is a marine landscape painter, with a strange partiality for setting up her easel in the neighbourhood of naval bases. To-to is but a thin disguise for the mysterious Magstein, and Poppherintski is a renegade Slav who does some very neat things in the way of stealing documents from the Russian Embassy.

In place of the Riviera hotel we next get a coast defence station on the shores of England. The gun stands there in the dim and eerie dusk, pointing skywards defiantly, and beside it on the sward lies its brave inventor—drugged! Two masked shapes appear dragging a third. From the moans of the third we learn with horror that she is no other than the unfortunate Martha. The other two we know by instinct (even before they began to whisper "Gott strafe!") must be Magstein and Poppherintski.

They raise the pinioned girl skywards; they heave her downwards; she disappears down the muzzle of the gun! Then Magstein springs on a parachute and ascends to join a Zeppelin. This is the end of a chapter.

The next chapter opens with one of the most exciting moments imaginable. The

heroic Colonel, shaking off the fumes of the drug, staggers to the gun and aims it by the light of the moon at the whizzing Zeppelin overhead. The fate of England hangs upon this one shot, and the reader knows that no shell, but the fair Martha herself, is in the breech. What is going to happen? (This is the nearest approach to a problem permitted in the new fiction.)

Bang! By the rays of the moon the delighted reader perceives not Martha but Popherintski speeding heavenwards! Being well soaked in petrol, he presently bursts into flames. He hits the Zepp a sickening smack, and the next moment, with a terrific explosion, the gigantic airship hurtles earthwards, the form of its pirate captain heading the descent. It is Magstein—he has been precipitated!

The explanation is as simple as it is ingenious. Randolph and Aunt Seraphina, noticing a faint sound of sobbing in the gun, have rescued Martha and substituted Popherintski, who, unfortunately for himself, was discovered gloating in the vicinity. The petrol Aunt Seraphina was carrying to remove stains from bandages, so that everything is accounted for perfectly naturally. And, needless to say, on the finger of Martha gleams an engagement ring.

To complete the close parallel between the Emancipation and the Precipitation, the latter incident would be retained, except that the news which gladdens the gallant Colonel's eyes is the intimation that he is now a K.C.B. and Randolph a D.S.O.

J. STORER CLOUSTON.

From Blackwoods Magazine, London.

A FRAGMENT

A new anecdote of the Kaiser may not come amiss. When he was a boy of some seven years of age, his mother, wishing to improve his English, sent for Dean A. (a divine well known to her), and asked him to undertake Prince Wilhelm's education for a little while. The Dean, when he knew the boy well, spoke with compassion one day of his withered left arm. The Prince's eyes fired. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "but it's not my sword arm!"